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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 MANILA 002406

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/PMBS, INR/EAP, INR/B

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/26/2015

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [SOCI](#) [RP](#)

SUBJECT: POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE PHILIPPINES

REF: A. MANILA 2167

[¶](#)B. MANILA 1808

[¶](#)C. MANILA 1401

[¶](#)D. 03 MANILA 6332

Classified By: Political Officer Andrew McClearn for
Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[¶](#)1. (C) Summary: Party organizations are relatively weak in the Philippines and are overshadowed by the influence of personalities. Parties tend to coalesce around popular political leaders during electoral campaigns due to the desire for patronage, but otherwise are underfunded, without clear programs, and largely ineffective. Some of the larger national parties have recently focused on party-building activities, but with limited success. The pro-Arroyo coalition, at first glance, has strong support in both the House and Senate, but its support is often skin-deep. Anti-Arroyo forces are fragmented, although a large faction remains loyal to former president Joseph Estrada. Various leftist "party list" groups linked with the Communist Party of the Philippines - New People's Army (CPP-NPA) are active in the House -- and on the streets. For reasons of stability and coherence, a stronger party system would be a positive development, but there is little sign that parties will trump personalities any time soon. Mission will continue to look for opportunities to enhance appreciation of political parties and highlight their importance in a democratic system. End Summary.

Party Politics and Personalities

[¶](#)2. (SBU) Party organizations are relatively weak in the Philippines and are overshadowed by the influence of personalities. On the surface, party politics are alive and well in the Philippines. There are 103 political parties registered with the Commission of Elections (COMELEC) and literally hundreds of unregistered parties -- mostly very small -- operating in the country. These parties represent views across the political spectrum. That said, given the entire mosaic of Philippine politics, parties basically serve as bit players compared to the role that personalities play. In fact, parties primarily service the needs of political personalities, who have gained influence usually due to their family links. During periods of national campaigns, the larger political parties sometimes gain strength due to their association with powerful personalities who can give patronage in exchange for votes and support. Party influence tends to recede dramatically, however, after the election takes place, when the money dries up and attention totally focuses on the personality in power. During the run-up to the May 2004, for example, President Arroyo's Lakas Christian Muslim Democrats (Lakas-CMD) Party gained a certain degree of influence as it organized rallies and other events for the president. Its influence receded after the election, however.

[¶](#)3. (C) Recently, the larger national parties have focused on party-building activities, but with limited success. Lakas-CMD and several other parties have participated in workshops in Manila and elsewhere meant to encourage such institution-building activities as ways to increase membership, develop party platforms, implement standardized funding mechanisms, and facilitate rule-based decision-making among members. Opposition senators Edgardo Angara and Jinggo Estrada both introduced 2004 legislation to reform the party system by limiting party switching, among other proposals. Their bills are languishing in committees, however. Conversations with party advocates have confirmed that real commitment among politicians to these reform efforts remains elusive. Lakas-CMD Director Francis Manglapus told poloff recently that even Lakas -- the largest of the national parties -- is understaffed, underfunded, and over-reliant on the wealth of a few single benefactors to be truly effective as a national political organization.

The Pro-Arroyo Coalition

[¶](#)4. (C) President Arroyo's coalition, at first glance, commands strong support in both the House of Representatives

and the Senate. Approximately 200 of 236 House members and 14 of 23 Senators belong to parties considered allies of the President. Indeed, despite some difficulties and delays, the President has been able to rely on her coalition to get key fiscal reform and other bills through the legislature. Loyalty to the President is often skin-deep, however. Major members of her coalition are listed below:

-- The Lakas-CMD party grew out of the presidential campaign of former president Fidel Ramos in 1992. President Arroyo is Lakas Chair, although party policies and discipline is largely implemented by party president and House Speaker Jose de Venecia. Lakas-CMD has seven senators, 75 representatives, and has the broadest national party network.

It is probably the single most influential political party in central Luzon, much of the Visayas, and Mindanao, including the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). Most commentators associate Lakas with "Trapos" (traditional politicians), who are experts in backroom politicking, and -- unfortunately for Arroyo -- frequently tainted by public perceptions that they represent entrenched interests or are corrupt. The President largely stays out of Lakas-CMD affairs, although she supported a recent initiative by Speaker de Venecia to call together leaders of the major parties in an effort focused on showing unity against any extra-constitutional efforts to bring down the government. Some members of Lakas-CMD are firmly set against the KAMPI group (see below), which is made up of close Arroyo associates. These Lakas members feel (accurately) that KAMPI is sapping membership away from Lakas;

-- The Kabalikat ng Malayang Pilipino (KAMPI) party is closely associated with President Arroyo. Arroyo originally formed KAMPI as a vehicle for her successful run for vice-president in 1998, but the party was relatively dormant for years. After Arroyo's victory in 2004, however, KAMPI enlisted some 35 members, mostly disgruntled Lakas-CMD politicians or others interested in KAMPI because of its links to the President, the ultimate patron. KAMPI officials have confirmed to poloffs that the party counts on the close support of the President, in particular through unofficial links with First Gentleman Mike Arroyo. Observers have asserted that the President uses KAMPI to keep Lakas-CMD stalwart and House Speaker de Venecia's ambitions in check. Media reports suggest that KAMPI has more financial resources than other large parties;

-- The Liberal Party (LP) contains many top Filipino politicians, including: Senate President Franklin Drilon; Senate Majority Leader Francis Pangilinan; and Senator Manuel "Mar" Roxas, the top vote-getter in last year's national senate race. The LP has 34 representatives and the three top-tier senators listed above. Education Secretary Florencio Abad and Environment Secretary Michael Defensor are also members of the party. LP leaders have worked closely with Lakas to support the administration's agenda. Many have speculated that the LP is gearing up to support a run by one of its own for president in 2010, with observers frequently mentioning Mar Roxas as a possible candidate;

-- The Nationalist People's Coalition (NPC), led by well-known businessman and former Marcos associate Eduardo "Danding" Cojuangco, continues to have strong support in the House of Representatives with some 40 members. House Ways and Means Chairman and NPC Rep. Jesli Lapus has been key in pushing through numerous pieces of fiscal legislation proposed by the Arroyo Administration. However, the defection of a small group of NPC members to the opposition has called into question the party's effectiveness and commitment to the pro-Arroyo coalition (see Para 5);

-- The Nacionalista Party (NP) is led by senators Manuel Villar (the wealthiest member of the legislature) and Ralph Recto. In addition to these two senators, it counts 14 representatives as members. NP was a key part of the pro-Arroyo coalition during the 2004 elections, although its contrary positions to those of the administration on an array of issues, such as taxation and bilateral ties with the U.S., increasingly strain this connection. NP's visibility will rise when Villar assumes the Senate Presidency in December 2005, the result of a power-sharing agreement reached with Senator Drilon of the LP.

A Fragmented Opposition

15. (C) Despite on-and-off efforts to organize themselves into a coherent force, anti-Arroyo forces remain fragmented, although a large faction remains loyal to former president Joseph Estrada. The major opposition groups include:

-- Former president Estrada leads the Partido ng Masang Pilipino (PMP). The party has attempted to reinvigorate party rolls, its organization, and its reputation as the party of the "masa" (Ref B). Two senators count themselves

members of the party, including Loi Estrada (the wife of Estrada) and Jinggoy Estrada (a son). (Note: Senators Juan Ponce Enrile and Jamby Madrigal were active PMP members, but recently declared themselves to be independents. Both still retain some links to the party, however.) PMP has limited reach in the House with only two members. PMP mounts vigorous public relations efforts -- as evidenced at www.erap.ph -- but remains seriously debilitated by the fact that party chairman Estrada is under house arrest and on trial, accused of corruption and plunder;

-- The Laban ng Demokratikong Pilipino (LDP) party is in disarray, although respected Senator Edgardo Angara retains his position as head of the party. Once one of the stronger parties, only seven representatives remain in the LDP. Popular former LDP members such as Sen. Panfilo Lacson and Rep. Ronaldo Zamora have become independents after much-publicized rows with Angara;

-- Senate Minority Leader Aquilino Pimentel leads Partido Demokratikong Pilipino (PDP-Laban). The other senator in PDP-Laban is Cebu-based Sergio Osmena III. Rep. Teodoro Locsin is the party's only House member. This group derives clout due to Pimentel's standing as a senior statesman from Mindanao and copious financial support provided by Makati Mayor Jejomar Binay and Locsin, two wealthy party members;

-- Rep. Imee Marcos, the articulate daughter of former president Ferdinand Marcos and his wife, Imelda Marcos, leads Kilusang Bagong Lipunan (KBL). KBL began as provincial party, and only has Marcos as a member in the House and no representation in the Senate. Marcos has roundly criticized the administration in both public and private forums. According to Marcos, her value to the opposition is to provide name recognition, youth, and energy (she is 49). Her brother, Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. is the governor of Ilocos Norte Province in northern Luzon island;

-- As noted above, a small faction of the NPC has joined the opposition. House Minority Leader, Rep. Francis Escudero leads this faction. Escudero, who also campaigned in 2004 for opposition candidate Fernando Poe Jr., will likely run for the Senate in 2007.

The & Legal Left8

16. (C) Various leftist "party list" groups linked with the CPP-NPA are active in the House -- and on the streets. These groups have been relatively effective at rallying public support, most recently by organizing protests to oppose tax legislation, and against job cuts and cost of living increases. There are now 24 members of the House of Representatives elected by the "party list" system -- roughly half of whom are leftists (Ref D). Groups within this rubric include:

-- Rep. Satur Ocampo, a long-time leftist, heads Bayan Muna (BM), which has three representatives. A more moderate representative, Teodoro "Teddy" Casino, is also a party member. BM often takes the lead in organizing protests along with other leftist groups. BM representatives have recently accused elements of the GRP's security forces of systematically killing BM leaders across the country (Ref C);

-- Anak Pawis, Gabriela, and Partido ng Mangagawa are closely allied with Bayan Muna and, overall, have four members in the House. Led by representatives Crispin Beltran, Liza Maza, and labor organizer Renato Magtubo, these three groups focus on youth, women, and labor issues, respectively;

-- Of the leftist parties in the House, Akbayan is the most important one that is not associated with the CPP-NPA. It has three members in the House and is led by long-time human rights activist Rep. Loretta Ann Rosales. Akbayan has a history of very frosty relations with Bayan Muna, with Rosales complaining that she has received death threats from the NPA.

Comment

17. (C) For reasons of stability and coherence, a stronger party system would be a positive development in the Philippines, but there is little sign that parties will trump personalities any time soon. Deep, lasting family ties are an abiding factor in Philippine culture and scions of influential families will continue to prove crucial in the political system, both at the national and local level. In light of this, the relative strength of political parties will continue to ebb and flow mainly according to their links with popular personalities. For example, Lakas-CMD will likely gain or lose influence per House Speaker de Venecia's

political fortunes, while KAMPI's fortunes are totally dependent on Arroyo's, as is the case with the PMP and Estrada.

18. (SBU) Through USG assistance, the International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute have done capacity-building work with Philippine parties in the past. In addition, Mission has included young politicians in International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) projects focused on state and local government, accountability in government, and party organization and financing. Mission will continue to look for opportunities to enhance appreciation of political parties and highlight their importance in a democratic system.

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